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Changes in School Curriculum Administration in China

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Yunhuo Cui, Hao Lei, and Wenye Zhou
East China Normal University



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Abstract

Purpose—This study focuses on the establishment and evolution of the school curriculum administrative system in China.

Design/Approach/Methods—Based on policy papers and documents, this paper explores changes of the concept, tradition and practices of curriculum administration in China.

Findings—The curriculum administration since 1949 has developed from an “excessively centralized curriculum administration” model to a “sharing-based curriculum administration”. China’s three-level curriculum administrative system, comprising a national-, local-, and school-level curriculum administration framework, is explained and analyzed.

Originality/Value—This is a comprehensive scholarly review of historical changes in school curriculum administration in China. This paper also provides provocative suggestions for future development of school curriculum administration in the Chinese context.

Keywords

School curriculum administration;
Chinese curriculum reforms; three-
level curriculum administration
framework

For whom does the curriculum exist? Does it exist to benefit high-level leaders, headmasters, teachers, or children? Who formulates the curriculum for children? Is it created by experts, leaders, headmasters, teachers, or students and their parents? Is it formed unilaterally or through negotiation? Do parents have the right to understand the school curriculum and make suggestions and evaluations? All these questions reflect focal points of school curriculum administrative system reform for grades 1–12, and the concerns regarding how curriculum power should be distributed among the national government, local jurisdictions, schools, and other interest groups. A curriculum administration system accounts for the delegation of rights and obligations with regard to curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation among administrative levels. A curriculum administration system also comprises the roles of and relationship among these elements.

1 Curriculum Administration

China has long implemented a highly centralized curriculum administrative system.

After the mid-1980s, based on the *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, an elementary education system in which schools were run in stages and level-to-level administrations were controlled by local governments, under the unified leadership of the National Council. Accordingly, curriculum reform was begun under the “many textbooks under one syllabus” policy. A trial system of “multiple textbooks” was implemented within one province. Since the middle and later 1990s, the curriculum administrative system has been further tested, and the Ministry of Education has issued documents establishing a three-level curriculum administrative system. The three levels comprise the national, local, and school curriculum—with local curriculum, mainly referring to the provincial-level, rather than village-, town-, or subdistricts-level educational administration departments. The transition of elementary education from the administrative system, wherein schools are run by stages to the three-level curriculum administrative system appears inevitable; however, we should question why the reform toward the curriculum administrative system should be carried out, what experiences from other countries we can learn from, and how the reforms should be carried out. The motive behind and basis of the curriculum administrative system reform must be proven. In this section, these questions will be addressed to show that the three-level curriculum administrative system is well-suited to the contemporary curriculum and China's national educational situation.

1.1 The Concept of Curriculum Administration

Education administration is a critical part of national administration. The government's educational administration departments lead and manage the national education system (Xiao, 2004). In literature, curriculum administration refers to the national government's adjustment and control of the education system according to the law as well as the educational administration's execution of curriculum-related functions and responsibilities. The educational administration's curriculum-related functions mainly comprise the formulation of curriculum policies, development of curriculum schemes, and supervision of curriculum implementation (Han, 2015). Thus, scholars' conception of curriculum administration has been limited to school curriculum administration. However, the concept of curriculum administration should be understood to extend beyond school curriculum administration.

Sun (2001) described three conceptions of curriculum administration. Firstly, curriculum administration refers to the planning, guidance, decision-making, supervision, coordination, and other management measures. The personnel who perform these measures are members of administrative departments responsible for all aspects of curriculum administration, including management of the objectives, development, and implementation of curriculum. Secondly, curriculum administration is a crucial part of school management and involves systematic coordination between the management of organizations and human and physical conditions. Curriculum administration is a general term for various related actions performed to realize

education objectives. These actions involve the development, implementation, and evaluation of curriculum. Thirdly, all levels of educational administration departments and school administration organizations should share the critical responsibilities of curriculum administration. These responsibilities include formulating and implementing school curriculum design, guiding and monitoring school curriculum implementation, and leading and organizing school curriculum evaluation. The first two of these conceptions restrict curriculum administration to school curriculum management, and the third fails to differentiate between curriculum management and curriculum administration.

Chen (2001) defines curriculum administration as the determination and management of teaching programs (curriculum plans), syllabus (curriculum standards), and textbooks by an educational administration. This definition explains part of curriculum administration, but does not clarify the difference between educational administration and curriculum administration.

Globally, curriculum administration is understood as follows. Firstly, curriculum administration refers to curriculum development. Haft and Hopmann (1990) reported that curriculum administration is curriculum development by analyzing the history of curriculum administration from the 19th to 20th century from the perspective of curriculum development cases. Secondly, some scholars believe that independent and responsible behavior of administrative personnel is necessary to ensure the development, coordination, implementation, support, evaluation and adjustment of curricula (Lattuca & Stark, 2011). According to these scholars, curriculum administration involves three main aspects. First, teachers and administrators jointly develop, implement, and adjust the curriculum and guide students. Second, administrators create an educational environment. Third, administrators lead large-scale and transferable curriculum reform (Lattuca & Stark, 2011). These analyses show that international researchers understand curriculum administration mainly from the micro perspective. Consequently, a satisfactory theory of curriculum administration has not yet been developed.

Hence, curriculum administration research requires further development. For research convenience, hereafter, curriculum administration is defined as measures that an educational administration department implements related to curriculum construction, development, and improvement. This not only includes the formulation of national curriculum policies but also schools' curriculum management and other policies.

1.2 Three Classic Curriculum Administration Traditions

People who decide upon the contents of a curriculum are within the scope of curriculum administration. Internationally, curriculum administration can be divided into three classic models. The first model is the national standard curriculum. In France, since the Napoleonic period, the central government has stipulated the

nationally unified basic education curriculum of France based on a set of essential documents, referred to as “national standard curriculum” (also known as centralism). Before the October Revolution (1917), Russia also implemented a centralized and unified “national standard curriculum”, following France’s example. The second model is the local standard curriculum. For instance, the United States has always implemented a decentralized administrative management system whereby states use various administration methods. Moreover, within each state, curriculum provisions of various school districts also differ. This system represents a “local standard curriculum” model (also known as decentralization). The third is school-based curriculum. For instance, the United Kingdom government maintains responsibility for syllabi, standardized tests, and educational supervision, but does not interfere in school curriculum, which schools determine independently.

These represent categorizations of the curriculum administrative systems of various countries according to the general view of curriculum. Curriculum can be divided into four levels, namely curriculum plan (teaching plan), curriculum standard (syllabus), teaching books (textbooks), and curriculum implementation (teaching). Thus, the national administrative power of various countries depends on the level at which the administrators are involved.

France pioneered implementation of a national standard curriculum, where the central government issued mandatory teaching plans. In the early 1900s, schools were granted the power to choose textbooks independently (Estivalèzes, 2011). However, the textbooks had to be used to meet the teaching requirements of government syllabi; therefore, the freedom involved in textbook choice was limited. Teachers organized classes based on the topics in the syllabus, rather than primarily on the topics or structure of the textbook. These measures allowed for some teaching autonomy within the national standard curriculum framework, and to some extent, relieved the conflict between centralized policies and effective teaching.

In contrast to France’s system, Russia’s central educational administrative department stipulated mandatory, uniform teaching plans, syllabi, and textbooks. Thus, this past system in Russia is an example of a classic national standard curriculum. The Russian syllabi differed from the French syllabi. Russian syllabi comprised “introductions” and “text”. The text of each syllabus stipulated the volume, chapter, section, contents, and title of the subject textbook, and guidelines for teachers with regard to the basic concepts, normative formulation of the ideas, teaching time distribution, assignments, and suggested teaching methods and instruments. Government syllabi comprised not only the legal standards for textbook contents, but also the criterion to evaluate teaching. Schools could only permit teaching based on textbooks.

As for the local standard curriculum in the United States, education departments of all states only stipulate general curriculum requirements, such as the timetable for daily reading teaching for lower grades, credits per discipline required for middle school students to graduate, and standards for minimum ability tests according to grade level. Therefore, school districts and schools have considerable decision-making

power with regard to the specific topics taught within state-required subjects and choice of supplemental subjects, and schools' independent curriculum formulation is a critical factor in curriculum administration (Schmidt, Wang, & McKnight, 2005).

In the United Kingdom, school curriculum was not explicitly covered in the *Education Act 1944* (Cook, 1999). After World War II, the central government seemed to hold the power to manage curriculum, but failed. Local education authorities were unwilling to manage curriculum, and thus, they transferred the power to the schools. Finally, curriculum became the "private affair" of school teachers, and the school-based curriculum was formed.

Under various curriculum systems, operating mechanisms of curriculum activities differ. Russia implemented a typical centralized mechanism, whereas the United Kingdom has consistently implemented a free mechanism. Thus, a national standard curriculum is not the only curriculum administration model; a school-based curriculum is also an option. The centralized and free mechanism each presents advantages and disadvantages.

In the centralized mechanism, the government strictly controls curriculum implementation. National-level administration is paramount, and low-level administrators and teachers implement national standards in local districts and schools with weak concepts of specification. This model is conducive to standardized curriculum implementation, but it inhibits schools and teachers from instituting curriculum choices according to the practical situation of the local district and students. By contrast, under the free mechanism, schools and teachers hold the power to determine local school curricula based on the particular situation of their district and the wishes of students' parents. This model enables development of locale-specific and nonstandard school curriculum and decentralizes the administration of the basic education curriculum.

Curriculum administrative systems of various countries can generally be divided into the centralized and free mechanisms, and historically, these models appear to be polar opposites. However, administrative power distribution across the various curriculum levels differs, and no country follows a curriculum management system which is absolutely centralized or absolutely decentralized. Therefore, when examining curriculum management system of a country, all levels must be analyzed. In research on China's situation, the management system resulting from the balance of power between the central and local governments is regarded as a separate system in which elements of both centralization and decentralization are present. The administrative levels involved in the determination of curriculum are the central government, local governments, and schools, and the nature of a system can be judged according to the distribution of curriculum decision-making power among the various administrative levels.

1.3 Trends in Curriculum Administration Development

The three models of curriculum administrative systems reflect the particular choices of

countries with regard to the distribution and direction of curriculum-related responsibilities at various levels of administration, and each system presents advantages and disadvantages. However, this conception remains insufficient. For example, the “disciplinary structure movement”, which was initiated in the United States in the 1960s and spread globally, practiced national curriculum on a large scale. The system featured a top-down model and university experts developed the unified curriculum. However, the movement failed; the school-based curriculum was much favored. Therefore, the international curriculum research community started to conduct an in-depth study of the distribution of curriculum-related decision-making power, the curriculum development model, and other problems the movement faced.

As a result, since the 1970s, the curriculum management system in many countries have developed toward more even distribution of power. Reformers realized that rigid management under the centralized curriculum administrative system inhibited innovation and flexibility, and they started transferring curriculum-related decision-making power to local governments and schools. Japan and France with centralist traditions began to redistribute curriculum-related administrative power. However, when loose management and uneven development under the new curriculum administrative system was discovered, central governments reclaimed the decision-making power that they deemed had been excessively entrusted to local governments and schools. Thus, the central governments attempted to ensure the realization of the national curriculum design ideal. By contrast, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia with decentralized traditions began to reflect on the disadvantages of excessively decentralized curriculum administration, and proposed national curricula, national curriculum standards, and criterion-reference tests. Hence, both countries with centralized curriculum administrative systems and those with decentralized curriculum administrative systems adjusted toward the opposites of their traditions to reform curriculum-related power distribution. Through these reforms, countries on both ends of the spectrum transitioned toward democratic participation in curriculum development, breaking original development and management models of extreme concentration of administrative power. Therefore, in China, a management framework featuring both centralized and decentralized curriculum-related administrative power is consistent with historical trends in national and democratic curriculum development.

2 Evolution of Curriculum Administration in China

In the previous section, three classic international curriculum administration types and curriculum administration development trends were analyzed. Hence, how should China’s curriculum administration be described? Analysis of curriculum administration in the China indicates that the system has undergone a transition

from centralization to sharing.

2.1 1949–2001: Excessively Centralized Curriculum Administration

With the founding of China as the People's Republic, political independence prompted the reestablishment of the education administration system. However, because of international blockade, the government could only propose the basic policy of "constructing new democratic education system based on the new education experience of the liberated areas, absorbing the useful experience of the old education system, and borrowing from Soviet experience" (He, 1998). In 1950, *Provisional Regulations on the Teaching of Middle Schools (Draft)* was issued by the Ministry of Education. Although it was a provisional document with numerous deficiencies, it was critical in the function of China's education administration system. In 1951, China enjoyed a friendly relationship with the Soviet Union. Chinese government officials studied the Soviet Union in all respects, including education. Based on their study of the Soviets, Chinese policymakers abolished the "6–3–3" school system (6 years in primary school and 3 years each in junior and senior high school), which included both compulsory and optional, uniform and local courses. The Government Administration Council then issued the *Decision on Reforming School System*. In this system, the "4–2" system for primary school was replaced with the "5-year consistent system", and the duration of middle school remained 6 years—3 years each for junior and senior high school. However, because this new system appeared to shorten the time for talent development, the "6–3–3" school system was restored 2 years later.

In March 1952, the Government Administration Council issued *Provisional Regulations on Primary Schools* and *Provisional Regulations on Middle Schools*. These measures established the primary and middle school curriculum framework, mainly involving curriculum mode, teaching plan, and syllabus. This curriculum framework was implemented nationwide, and the two documents stipulated centralized curriculum administration for primary and middle schools. The national government held the power to make curriculum-related decisions, and local administrations formulated measures for curriculum implementation and faithful execution of central education department policies. All standardized courses were required, and uniform teaching methods were implemented nationally. Thus, the flexibility for students to explore within the curriculum was compressed. People's Education Press was established in 1950 to compile the nationally uniform textbooks. In 1951, the national textbooks for primary and secondary schools were published. In September 1955, the *Primary School Teaching Plan* was issued; this plan proposed enhancing labor education and physical training. However, the labor education curriculum was not set until the issuance of the *Table of Teaching Hours for Secondary Schools* in 1956–1957. The *Instructions on Educational Work*, issued in 1958, established that the purpose of educational policies was serving proletarian politics, and the purpose of education was developing literate workers with a socialist consciousness (Zhang,

1984). This highly centralized system of curriculum administration was then implemented and maintained with some small adjustments. The completely Soviet-style curriculum administration presented some shortcomings, which prompted the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee to adjust the education policy in 1961, establishing the curriculum guidelines of “adjustment, consolidation, enrichment, and improvement”. In 1963, the CPC Central Committee issued the *New Teaching Plan for Full-time Primary and Secondary Schools (Draft)* to address areas of confusion and improve quality. The new plan proposed providing optional courses, departing from the single course structure of the Soviet model, and initiating a shift away from excessively centralized curriculum power. However, this adjustment was only a simple modification to the ideology and implementation of the Soviet curriculum, rather than a total reform of the excessively centralized curriculum administration. The Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976 devastated the curriculum administration system because the curriculum was harnessed for strengthening educational revolution.

The two education regulations issued in 1952 established the Ministry of Education’s regulations, ranging from curriculum content to curriculum evaluation, and remained in national implementation. This system curriculum administration lasted until order was achieved over chaos on the educational front in 1978. Since then, the Chinese government has begun to learn from the experiences and methods of other countries (for instance, studying the textbooks from the United Kingdom, United States, and Soviet Union) and to gradually integrate their findings in reforms of curriculum content, provision, implementation, and evaluation. However, in addition to these reforms, the Ministry of Education has also issued new syllabi, re-established People’s Education Press, and compiled the fifth series of national textbooks for primary and secondary schools under the 10-year system. Based on the teaching syllabus and textbook compilation, curriculum administration in China remains highly centralized. Although educational administration departments have enacted numerous measures to adjust curriculum administration since the reform and opening-up period, the centralized curriculum administration did not change substantially until the beginning of the 21st century. In the *Full-Time Primary School Teaching Plan (Revised Draft)* (see Table 1), *Revised Opinions on the Full-Time Five-Year Secondary School Teaching Plan (Trial Draft)* (see Table 2), and *Full-Time Six-Year Key School Teaching Plan (Trial Draft)* issued in 1981, quality of cultural and scientific knowledge was prioritized, and in 1985, People’s Education Press achieved their highest output of national textbooks for primary and secondary schools. Therefore, in the following years uniform textbooks were still used nationwide and served as a means to centralize curriculum power.

Although centralized power still characterizes subsequent curriculum administration, the momentum of curriculum administrative system reform has gradually increased since 1985. In May 1985, *CPC Central Committee’s Decision on the Reform of the Education System* was issued and represented the general decision to deviate from past models of excessively centralized education administration. In 1986, *Compulsory Education*

Table 1. Full-time primary school teaching plan (Revised Draft; Weekly Class Hours).
(Yan, Long, & Zhang, 2000)

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Total class hours	Percentage
Ideological and Ethical Education	1	1	1	1	1	180	3.9
Sub-total	11	12	11	9	9	1,872	40.3
Chinese	10	11	8	6	6		
Composition			2	2	2		
Writing	1	1	1	1	1		
Mathematics	6	6	6	7	7	1,152	24.8
Foreign Language				(3)	(3)	(216)	
Nature			2	2	2	216	4.7
Geography				2		72	1.6
History					2	72	1.6
PE	2	2	2	2	2	360	7.8
Music	2	2	2	2	2	360	7.8
Fine Arts	2	2	2	1	1	288	6.2
Labor				1	1	72	1.6
Subjects offered synchronously	6	6	7	9	9		
Total class hours per week	24	25	26	27	27	4,644	
Self-study	2	2	2	2	2		
Science and technology entertainment	2	2	2	2	2		
Extracurricular activities	2	2	2	2	2		
Physical activities	2	2	2	2	2		
Weekly meeting and class activities	1	1	1	1	1		
Total amount of school activities per week	31	32	33	34	34		

Table 2. Revision opinions on the full-time five-year secondary school teaching plan.
(Trial Draft) (Yan, Long, & Zhang, 2000)

	Junior high school			Senior high school			Total class hours
	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	
Politics	2	2	2	2	2		320
Chinese	6	6	6	6	4		872
Mathematics	5	6	6	6	6		926

Continued

	Junior high school			Senior high school			Total class hours
	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	
Foreign Language	5	5	5	4	5		768
Physics		2	3	4	5		432
Chemistry			3	3	4		304
History	3	2		3			266
Geography	3	2		2			234
Biology	2	2		2			192
Physical Hygiene			2				64
PE	2	2	2	2	2		320
Music	1	1	1				100
Fine Arts	1	1	1				100
Total class hours per week	30	31	31	31	30		4,898
Labor and Technology		2 weeks			4 weeks		576

Law of the People's Republic of China was introduced, legislatively establishing compulsory education. The passage of the law indicated an increasing national focus on education. The National Education Commission formulated the *Teaching Plan for Full-time Primary Schools and Junior High Schools under Compulsory Education* in coordination with the compulsory education law. After several revisions, the plan was officially executed in 1990. The plan emphasized not only ideological and political subjects but also other subjects. Class hours of physical education (PE), history, and other subjects were increased; labor and technology were officially included in the course timetable; and time for social activities was increased. In 1990, the 1986 *Teaching Plan* was revised and reissued as the *Curriculum Plan*. In 1992, the *Curriculum Plan for Full-time Primary and Junior High Schools under Nine-Year Compulsory Education (Trial)* was issued, along with the supporting *Syllabus (Trial)* of 24 subjects, which was implemented in the fall of 1993. For senior high schools, *Curriculum Plan for Full-Time Regular Senior High Schools (Trial Version)* was issued in 1996, based on the *Opinions on the Adjustment of the Teaching Plan for Full-Time Regular Senior High Schools* issued and adjusted for 6 years. It was favorable for strengthening the link with a compulsory education curriculum plan. As for textbooks, the new national unified textbooks revised in 1988 were adopted. In 1997, *Several Opinions on Actively Promoting the Implementation of Quality Education in Primary and Secondary Schools* was issued by the National Education Commission; in 1998, *Action Plan for Education Rejuvenation for the 21st Century* was publicized by the Ministry of Education; in 1999, *Decision on Deepening Education Reform and Promoting the Quality Education* was issued by the National Council. All these moves accompanied the reform of the current basic

education curriculum system, and acceleration of the construction of the new basic education curriculum system adapted to the development needs of the times. Therefore, curriculum administration of this period encouraged “many textbooks on one syllabus”, local curriculum was valued, and attention was paid to local characteristics; however, the feature of curriculum administration—highly concentrated in the central educational administrative department—remained unchanged.

2.2 2001–Present: Sharing-Based Curriculum Administration

In 2001, the National Council issued the *Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education*. In the same year, the Ministry of Education put forward the *Outline of the Reform of Basic Education Curriculum (Trial)*. This outline made provisions for school-based curricula in the national curriculum system for the first time, indicating that China’s curriculum administration was moving away from strict centralization. The 2001 round of curriculum reform involves increased emphasis on students’ personalities and interests. The policies stress that curriculum content should be coordinated with students’ life experiences, and independent, exploratory, and collaborative learning are encouraged. Thus, students are given a dominant role in their education. The new curriculum system covers preschool education, compulsory education, and general high school education. The objectives of the system are making a breakthrough (committed to cultivate talents, but not to impart knowledge) in curriculum function, optimizing and adjusting curriculum structure, updating curriculum content, transforming instruction and learning methods, establishing new evaluation criteria, and implementing a three-level curriculum administrative system (national, local, and school). The 2001 outline delineates six objectives for curriculum reform:

- (1) To shift away from the old curriculum’s stress on knowledge instruction, emphasize the formation of a positive learning attitude, enable acquisition of basic knowledge and skills, and encourage learning processes resulting in the formation of positive values.
- (2) To change the status quo of the subject-based curriculum structure, which involves too many subjects and a lack of integration; establish curriculum categories and class-hour proportions for the nine-year compulsory education system; create an integrated curriculum that is adaptable to the developmental needs of various local districts and students; and promote balance, synthesis, and selectivity (meet the needs of students’ curriculum selection) in the curriculum.
- (3) To update curriculum content, changing the “difficult, complicated, partial, and old” aspects and relieving excessive focus on book learning; strengthen links between curriculum content and student life, modern society, and technological development; prioritize students’ interests and experiences; and select basic knowledge and skills required for lifelong learning for inclusion in the curriculum.
- (4) To reform the standards for curriculum implementation to relieve excessive emphasis on receptive learning, rote memorization, and mechanical drills; encourage students

to actively participate in class; and develop students' ability to collect and process information, analyze and solve problems, communicate, and cooperate.

- (5) To shift the function of curriculum evaluation away from screening and selection; create evaluations that promote student development and contribute to good teaching practice.
- (6) To reform the overly centralized curriculum management system; implement a system in which curriculum is managed at three levels: national, local, and school; and enhance the adaptability of the curriculum to local governments, schools, and students. (Ministry of Education of China, 2001)

In 2001, the Ministry of Education also issued the *Compulsory Education Curriculum Program (Trial)* and the *Curriculum Standards for 20 Subjects Including Chinese (Trial Version)*. In addition, the Ministry of Education established experimental textbooks for 20 primary and secondary schools (seven subjects for primary schools, and 13 subjects for secondary schools). The concrete reform measures follow the "experiment before popularizing" principle. The new curriculum was tested nationwide in 38 pilot areas in September 2001. In the fall of 2002, the experiment was expanded to 530 counties and cities. In the fall of 2004, based on overall evaluation and extensive discussion of the work of the pilot areas, curriculum reform entered the popularization stage. By 2005, the initial grades of primary and secondary schools had adopted the principles of the new curriculum (see Table 3). This curriculum reform has neither been a simple adjustment of curriculum content nor a replacement of old textbooks

Table 3. Outline of compulsory education curriculum (Ministry of Education of China, 2001).

		Grade									
		Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	
Category course amount	Morality & Life	Morality & Life	Morality & Society	Ideological & Ethical Education	Ideological & Ethical Education	Ideological & Ethical Education					
								History & Society (or History, Geography)			
			Science	Science	Science	Science	Science	Science (or Biology, Physics, Chemistry)			
	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	
	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	
			Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Foreign Language						
	PE	PE	PE	PE	PE	PE	PE	Sports & Health	Sports & Health	Sports & Health	
	Arts (or Music, Fine Arts)										
	Comprehensive Practic Activity										
	Courses compiled by the local government and school										

Continued

	Grade								
	26	26	30	30	30	30	34	34	34
Total number of classes per week (class)	26	26	30	30	30	30	34	34	34
Total class hours per academic year	910	910	1,050	1,050	1,050	1,050	1,190	1,190	1,122

Table 4. Outline of general high school curriculum (Zhong, Cui, & Zhang, 2001).

Learning fields	Subjects	Compulsory credits (A total of 116 credits)	Optional I (At least 22 credits)	Optional II (At least 6 credits)
Languages and Literature	Chinese	10	According to the social demand for talent diversification, to adapt to different students' potential and development needs, on the basis of common requirement, various courses are divided into several optional modules for students to choose from.	According to the needs of local society, economy, science and technology, cultural development and students' interest, the school offers several optional modules for students to choose from.
	Foreign language	10		
Mathematics	Mathematics	10		
Humanity and society	Politics	8		
	History	6		
	Geography	6		
Science	Physics	6		
	Chemistry	6		
	Biology	6		
Technology	Information technology	4		
	General technology	4		
Arts	Art or music, fine art	6		
Sports & Health	Sports & Health	11		
Comprehensive Practical Activity	Research-based learning	15		
	Community service	2		
	Social practice	6		

for new ones, but rather a systematic revolution. The reform has addressed the core of the courses and drawn on the entire field of education research to create an innovative curriculum and the transform of the concept of education in China. The reform covers curriculum concepts, objectives, methods, assessments, and the entire curriculum administration system. School-based curriculum is accounted for in the reformed curriculum reform system for the first time, serving as the level 1 parallel to national and local curricula. The analysis presented here illustrates that curriculum administration in China is increasingly focused on student development and moving toward a model of more evenly distributed power.

In 2001, new standards for the various subjects were implemented, and curriculum reform efforts entered a stage of practical exploration. From 2001 and 2003, curriculum standards-based educational practice was launched. Curriculum standards and teaching practices from the *Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Trial) (2001)* that required further refinement became evident. In 2003, to better adapt curriculum standards to the educational and teaching practices, the Ministry of Education deputized experts to perform tracking trials of the reformed curriculum practices. From 2004 to 2012, 31 provinces and cities were successively added to the reformed curriculum pilot areas. Over years of follow-up study on the curriculum reform experiment, researchers identified a serious problem of “mismatch” between the official curriculum reform concept and the educational and teaching practices (Cui, 2011).

In 2010, the Ministry of Education issued the *Outline of National Medium-and-Long-Term Program for Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* (hereafter “2010 program outline”) in line with the national policy initiative of “giving priority to the development of education and building a country of profound human resources”. The 2010 program outline aimed to generally advance national education quality and specifically promote scientific development of educational businesses. The overall objectives of the outline are as follows: prioritize development, make education as the root of China reform and innovate, promote fairness, and improve education system quality (Ministry of Education of China, 2010). In addition, the outline proposes “to first adhere to morality education and then to prioritize student abilities and all-round development”. With the issuance of this outline and the deepening of the curriculum reform, curriculum reform theory and practice have entered a new stage (Xue & Huang, 2016).

In accordance with the 2010 program outline, to address the areas' educational and teaching practices that required improvement, the Ministry of Education revised the curriculum standards for each compulsory education subject in 2010. In 2011, the Ministry of Education organized a committee of basic education curriculum experts to examine the revised curriculum standards. By the end of 2011, curriculum standards for each compulsory education subjects were issued.

In 2012, research initiatives were launched regarding the revision of the *New Curriculum Program for Senior High Schools*, which had been formulated during the new curriculum reform in China. In 2014, a project seeking opinions for the revision of the *Curriculum Program for Senior High Schools* was launched. To “make morality education the basic task of education”, develop the role of curriculum in talent training, increase the level of comprehensive education, and promote the general development and health of students of various schools at all levels, the Ministry of Education issued the *Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Deepening Curriculum Reform and Implementing the Basic Task of Morality Education* (hereafter, referred to as the *Opinions* of 2014). The policy objectives as described in this document are to “hold high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics; integrate socialist core values into textbooks, classrooms, and methods

of thought; focus on cultivating noble moral sentiments, solid scientific and cultural qualities, wholesome bodies and minds, and desirable aesthetic tastes among students; enable students to build a foundation in Chinese culture and shared socialist ideals with Chinese characteristics, as well as international vision; enable them to become qualified constructive socialists and reliable successors to the older generation; complete a logical teaching system, coordinating the various learning stages of college and university, elementary, and secondary school; establish a talent-training system, whereby main education and teaching links will be mutually complementary and compatible; and form the education pattern of multi-participation through concerted efforts and coordination". Thus, the *Opinions* of 2014 targets ten aspects of curriculum reform: study and promote development of students' key competencies and formulate academic quality standards; revise curriculum programs and standards; compile and revise college, university, primary, and secondary schools textbooks covering corresponding disciplines; improve the educational function of subject-specific courses; enhance the educational contribution of assessments and evaluations; strengthen teachers' abilities; perfect the education system through participation by the whole people; implement the plan for constructing a research foundation; integrate and utilize high-quality teaching resources; and strengthen management of curriculum implementation (Ministry of Education of China, 2014). The introduction of the *Opinions* of 2014 indicates that curriculum reform has entered a new period. Since 2014, as part of the new curriculum reform in China, preliminarily theoretical research on the key competencies of Chinese students has been completed (Lin, 2016), and key competency goals for various disciplines at the senior high school level have been proposed. In 2014, revision of the *Curriculum Standards of Subjects for General Senior High Schools* was performed on the basis of key competencies for various disciplines and the compilation of textbooks. By the end of 2017, the newly revised *Curriculum Program for General Senior High Schools* and curriculum standards for 20 subjects had been issued.

The analysis presented here demonstrates that with the deepening of the new curriculum reform, the three-level curriculum administrative system is gradually being implemented. Curriculum authority boundaries among the various interested parties are increasingly clear, and curriculum power-sharing among curriculum administrators is also becoming better defined. The structure and function of the three-level curriculum administrative system is presented in the following section.

3 Three-Level Curriculum Administration Framework: National, Local, and School

3.1 *New Curriculum System for Basic Education: A Kind of Assumption*

In the new curriculum plan, the subject categories, total weekly class hours, and distribution of hours under the standards of the national curriculum are explicitly

stipulated. A certain number of weekly class hours are reserved for the curriculum that the local governments and schools develop or select. The plan requires a corresponding curriculum management policy. Measures should be taken from the top down to ensure that local governments and schools effectively implement the national curriculum program; however, all parties with administrative power should be expected to uphold their responsibilities. The role of the manager should be reframed from “leader” to “instructor” and “service provider”, and they should provide guidance with regard to curriculum-related decisions. The manager should actualize the bidirectional management mechanism governed primarily from the top down and complemented from the bottom up (as is shown in Figure 1). Bottom-up curriculum management is mainly reflected in local governments and schools’ independent development of their own curricula. The local government and school administrators apply for filing and deliberation with the relevant superior department, and they also have the power and responsibility to offer opinions or suggestions about the problems that occur during implementation of the higher-level curriculum.

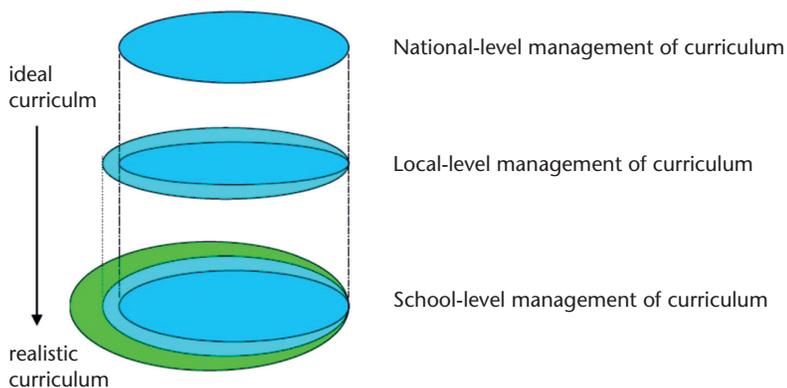


Figure 1. National curriculum project frame.

For convenience of communication and research, we must normalize some definitions related to curriculum affairs. According to global comparative research on curriculum, activities classified under “school-based curriculum development” (SBCD) vary greatly according to each country’s curriculum management style. Thus, SBCD activities may be sorted into two types: those of decentralized countries and those of centralized countries. In decentralized countries, such as England, the United States, and Austria, the central government (or national community) creates a uniform curriculum standard based on which schools determine what is taught (not only the content of textbooks). Therefore, the main personnel that develop curricula are at the school level. All the curricula used in schools can be called “school-based curriculum”; in other words, all curricula are school-specific. In centralized countries, such as Japan, France, Russia, and Thailand, the central government (or other institutions at this level) formulates a specific plan. All local districts and schools must carry out the plan, but some provisions are included for schools to design curriculum freely. For example,

France adopted a “10% flexible curriculum in middle schools” in 1973; Russia stipulated in its 1993 Basic Education Project that uniform compulsory courses should comprise 73.7% of total courses at the school level, and supplementary courses should comprise 26.3%.

Considering the Chinese educational tradition, the centralized-style SBCD should be implemented. A small portion of total class hours should be designated for curricula that meet the needs of particular students, schools, and local districts. National- or local-based curriculum should account for a general quality of education for students within a certain range, and school-based curriculum should address the special needs and interests of individual students. Students cannot be educated without both types of courses. The curriculum carried out in each school should comprise national-, local-, and school-based curricula (shown in Figure 2).

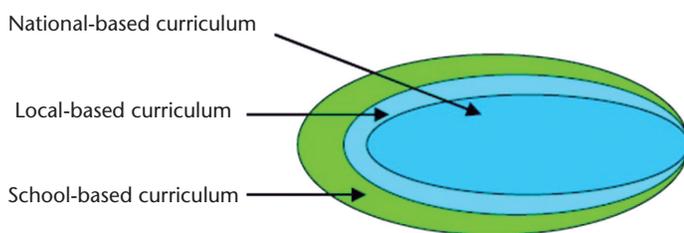


Figure 2. The structure of school curriculum.

A national-based curriculum embodies a government’s will. It is designed with the aim of fostering ideal citizens through education that engenders certain qualities in students. Chinese policymakers rely on the nature and training objectives to formulate curriculum standards for all subjects (that is, to formulate syllabi) and then compile textbooks. Nation-based curriculum is the main element of the curriculum framework for basic education, and a critical metric by which the quality of basic education is evaluated.

Under the national curriculum program, local-based curricula are designed and developed by provincial educational administrations or other educational institutions that the national administration authorizes. Curriculum administration depends on national and local policy development requirements, economy, and culture, and curricula must be developed according to the class hours prescribed in the national curriculum program.

Implementation of the two kinds of curriculum described in this section requires practice of SBCD. Through reasonable evaluation of the needs of our schools, we make full use of their curriculum resources and those of the local community to develop various and selective curricula. Curriculum development mainly depends on the educational principles of the Party, national and local curriculum programs, educational philosophy of each school, evaluation of students’ needs, and curricular resources of each school. China’s new curriculum emphasizes school-based curriculum, cooperation with the outside world, and full use of curriculum resources

in and out of schools. Thus, school-based curriculum is a critical part of the national curriculum program, which aims to realize national educational principles, create ideal schools, meet individual student needs, and increase teachers' expertise.

3.2 Rights and Duties of the Three Main Bodies

The rights of curriculum-related decision-making are distributed among the national, local, and school levels. The Ministry of Education is the highest authority in national educational administration, and it is the Ministry's duty to create principles, policies, and standards for national basic education and the national curriculum program framework. The duty of provincial educational administrations is to develop local-based curricula and direct schools in executing the Local Curriculum Program. The duty of the local administrations is to address the local situation and development requirements and to simultaneously meet national curriculum standards. When a national administration gives compulsory education administrative rights to local administrations, local administrations then undertake the responsibility of meeting national standards. In this situation, nation-based curriculum serves as local-based curriculum.

In schools, the ideal curriculum is transformed into the realistic curriculum through the actual education process. Therefore, school administrations should comprise one of the main bodies with rights to determine, develop, and manage curricula. Curriculum management at the school level is relative to curriculum management at the national and local levels. Figure 2 illustrates the two levels. One is the effective practice of nation-based curriculum and local-based curriculum, and the other is reasonable development of school-based curriculum.

Based on the considerations described in this section, the following sections will discuss curriculum management rights and duties at the national, local, and school levels.

3.2.1 National-Level Curriculum Management

The Ministry of Education is responsible for national management of curriculum; to this end the Ministry's major responsibilities are as follows:

- Guiding China's basic education curriculum reform at the macro level, and developing corresponding curriculum policies and a framework for planning the national basic education curriculum.
- Organizing means by which to create, amend, or approve the curriculum plan for the various stages of basic education in China. This duty entails regulation of the national curriculum structure for each educational stage, where the structure comprises learning areas, number of subjects, total class hours, weekly class hours, and class-hour allocation. School schedule and basic academic burden of students must also be strictly regulated.
- Issuing national curriculum standards, ensuring uniform basic academic requirements,

and defining the national basic education quality requirements.

- Formulating guidelines for the implementation of the national curriculum, assisting local governments and schools to creatively implement national curriculum plans according to their realistic conditions, and making provisions for the development of local curriculum programs.
- Determining an assessment system for the basic education curriculum, and ensuring the effective implementation of national basic education curriculum objectives at all stages. If necessary, organizing nationwide standardized tests.
- Formulating three-level curriculum management policies and issuing management guidelines for local and school curricula, and providing basic standards for the development of local school-based curricula as well as for the management of school-level basic education curriculum.
- Creating policies for the development and management of textbooks, and disclosing the approved primary and secondary textbook directory and assessment report to schools and national society at regular intervals.
- Monitoring the overall operating quality of the national basic education curriculum, and conducting regular spot examinations and follow-up research on primary and secondary schools' teaching, assessments, and development and utilization of curriculum resources; offering assessment reports.

3.2.2 *Local-Level Curriculum Management*

Local governments serve as a link in China's education administration system, playing a role that would be difficult for the central government to fill. With the establishment of the three-level curriculum management system, local governments obtain the right to develop and manage curriculum. They are no longer expected to merely serve as a "transfer stop" and executor of central government curriculum policy. As a result, the basic education management system featuring local responsibility and stages for running schools is being gradually improved. This system offers greater curricular freedom for local governments to improve the quality of students' learning and endow education systems with local characteristics, furthering the development of the regional economy, society, and culture.

Rights and liabilities of the local educational administrative departments in curriculum administration mainly comprise implementation and management of the national curriculum, management and development of the local curriculum, and guidance and management of school-based curricula. The specific duties of educational administrative departments at the provincial (municipality, direct-controlled municipality) level are as follows:

- Developing a curriculum plan for each education phase and overseeing local curriculum plan implementation according to the requirements of the national curriculum plan, filing reports to the Ministry of Education, and continuously improving curriculum plan implementation.
- Monitoring primary and secondary schools' teaching and assessment systems, monitoring curriculum resource development and utilization throughout the

province, municipality, and direct-controlled municipality, recruiting research institutions to evaluate the working quality of the curriculum in primary and secondary schools through sampling surveys, follow-up studies, and other means, identifying, reflecting upon, and solving problems in the basic education curriculum reform process.

- Deputizing or cooperating with experts to develop local curricula under the Ministry of Education's standards for local curriculum management, developing guiding proposals for schools' implementation of the local curriculum.
- Supervising and assessing schools' execution of the national curriculum program through the subordinate educational administrative departments at all levels, ensuring that curriculum plans at all stages are comprehensively and effectively implemented.
- Through the subordinate educational administrative departments at all levels, guiding schools in development of school-based curricula and specific implementation plans for those curricula.
- County-level educational administrative departments considering the SBCD schemes reported by various primary and secondary schools within a specified time period and provide feedback.

3.2.3 *School-Level Curriculum Management*

Curriculum plans can only be authentically implemented in schools, because schools are where education actually occurs. Therefore, school management of curricula is critical for realizing the scope and objectives of the basic education curriculum. School curriculum management comprises two basic components: effective implementation of national and local curriculum and rational development of school-based curriculum. Major responsibilities of school curriculum administrations are as follows:

- Formulating a plan for the school-year curriculum, according to the relevant provisions of the Ministry of Education and provincial (municipality and directly controlled municipality) curriculum plans, and based on the practical situation of the local community and school; reporting to the superior educational administration department for filing, and establishing the courses stipulated in the high-level education administration department curriculum plan.
- Independently or in cooperation with off-campus institutions or personnel, developing school-based elective courses according to the related higher-level educational administration department policies and the traditions and strengths of the school, and reporting the development program for the school-based curriculum to the higher-level educational administration department for evaluation within a specified time.
- Selecting textbooks approved by the national or provincial administration, organizing a committee with extensive representation, such as teacher and student representation, to conduct the textbook selection, reflecting democratic principles, and considering parents' opinions.

- Addressing problems encountered in the implementation of national and local curriculum plans and establishing an internal assessment mechanism for the school-based curriculum to ensure that school-based curriculum is consistent with and complementary to the overall objectives of the national and local curricula.
- Managing all school courses according to the provisions of the superior educational administration department and the school's practical situation and establishing self-monitoring practices for teaching, assessment, examination, and development and use of curriculum resources, thereby ensuring the stability and improvement of the school quality.

In summary, the national basic education curriculum program comprises an integral whole. Although the development of national, local, and school curricula are different processes, national, local and school administrators jointly construct the national basic education curriculum system. These administrative levels only differ in terms of the focus and scope of their responsibilities.

4 Limitations and Conclusions

In the 21st century, the scope of curriculum reform has surpassed content and technology; curriculum reform must address what kind of talents to cultivate among students and how each country can best cultivate students' talents (Amadio, Tedesco, & Operti, 2015). A national curriculum is an embodiment of national will, mission, and goals, and curriculum administration is a crucial part of education administration. In addition, curricula must be reformed according to social, political, and economic changes.

In China, the general trend in reforms of the school curriculum administration has shifted from over-centralization to power-sharing. The construction of a three-level curriculum management framework has reflected such a change. The current system has integrated the uniform school curriculum framework and clearly divided administration among three bodies, each of which makes various contributions to the main curriculum construction. This system takes advantage of the initiative and creativity of local administrations and schools through enabling their participation in curriculum construction, improvement, and adaptation. Chinese school curriculum reform reflects the course of social reform in China as well as the trend of curriculum democratization.

In conclusion, we state the following:

Firstly, a country's curriculum administrative system and general administrative system are interrelated. However, they do not simply exist in direct correspondence; they are affected by the levels of social and economic development, cultural traditions, education development, and even international tendencies.

Secondly, the global curriculum administrative system development has a trend

toward democratic power distribution. Two types of administrative structures, centralization and decentralization, have been found to develop toward their opposites. Specifically, countries have moderately adjusted the distribution of curriculum power at the national, local, and school levels, according to what must be done in their practical situations. With these developments, new models of centralization and decentralization have emerged. For example, countries with a tradition of decentralization have implemented national curricula and national curriculum standards; however, these policies do not indicate implementation of a national standard curriculum as previously described. Curriculum standards remain elastic, leaving freedom for school administrations to make independent choices. Contrastingly, countries with centralized power traditions have experimented with aspects of the decentralizing systems. Some have adopted a national curriculum and curriculum standards, in accordance with the centralized model, but left space within the national plan for schools to design their own courses. Traditionally centralized countries' development of such "school-based curriculum", such as school-based curriculum in China, is different from that of countries with decentralization. In countries that implement decentralized systems, the national or local government will formulate compulsory courses for students and uniform curriculum standards. Subsequently, schools perform the "development of school-based curriculum" with specific teaching contents according to the standards the higher administrations have set. Thus, although manifestations of centralization and decentralization differ in concept and distribution of power in various countries, all countries have generally abandoned the "pendulum law" during reform of curriculum management systems to suit their particular conditions. Therefore, new meaning has been conferred upon centralization and decentralization, and governments have identified strategies for integrating and supplementing courses through various levels of administration. Such systems are historically profound and may continue to advance with the times.

Based on these findings, we should neither maintain a fixed viewpoint about institutional change nor adopt the alternative mode of thinking. We should be aware of the potential unity of opposites, be guided by systematic and dynamic analysis, consider the situation critically, select a power model as the basis for the curriculum administrative system, align with the strengths of the alternative power model to avoid the weaknesses of a polarized system, and thus, achieve curriculum power distribution (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Nevertheless, the reform also encounters some challenges, such as low capacity for curriculum development at local and school levels, an imperfect bottom-up curriculum deliberation mechanism, and a pending national curriculum implementation and monitoring system.

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Notes on Contributors

Yunhuo Cui, Professor and Director of Institute of Curriculum and Instruction at East China Normal University. He is the member of National Commission of Curriculum Reform of Basic Education in China, and member of National Commission of Teacher Training, and Vice Chairman of the Academic Committee of the Chinese Educational Society. He has published over 100 papers and books in effective teaching, curriculum evaluation, school-based curriculum development in China and the school-oriented teacher professional development model curriculum studies. He won the First and Second prizes on National Teaching Achievement Award of Basic Education. He served as a leading curriculum expert who framed and shaped the two major national curriculum reforms and the curriculum reform of national teacher education in China. Currently he is leading a National Breakthrough Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences named "Monitoring the Quality of School Curriculum Implementation in China".

Hao Lei, PhD in Education (East China Normal University–Purdue University Joint program supported by the National Overseas Fund), Associate Researcher of Institute of Curriculum and Instruction of East China Normal University. His research interests include curriculum and instruction evaluation, teacher professional development, student learning and development. He published more than 20 academic papers in SSCI and CSSCI journals. Currently he serves as the reviewer of *Psychological Reports* and *Global Education*.

Wenye Zhou, PhD in Education (East China Normal University–University of Wisconsin–Madison Joint program supported by the National Overseas Fund), Associate Chair of Department of Curriculum and Instruction at East China Normal University, and associate professor of Institute of Curriculum and Instruction of East China. She is a visiting scholar at Stanford Graduate School of Education from December 2016 to January 2018. Her research focuses on curriculum development and evaluation, classroom assessment, performance assessment, and teacher education. She is PI of two national research projects, "Key Competencies-based School Curriculum Development" and "Student Performance Assessment". She published over 40 academic papers and books, e.g., *Theories and Techniques of Performance Assessment in School*.

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